



Do We See Authentic Leadership the Same Way? A Multilevel Study of Leader–Follower Perceptions and Follower Commitment and Well-Being

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

TARJA TURTIO-ANNANOLLI

JOONA MUOTKA

TARU FELDT

MIKAEL NEDERSTRÖM

MARI HERTTALAMPI



STOCKHOLM
UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study examines how follower-perceived authentic leadership relates to follower commitment and well-being, while investigating leader–follower perceptual alignment and the moderating role of relationship duration.

Design/methodology/approach: The study draws on multilevel survey data from 1357 followers nested within 240 leaders across eight Finnish organizations. Multilevel modeling was used to analyze both within- and between-level relationships, examine perceptual variation and associations with follower commitment and well-being, and investigate moderation effects.

Findings: No significant association was found between leader and follower ratings, indicating perceptual variation. At the within level, follower-perceived authentic leadership was positively associated with job involvement and work engagement, and negatively with turnover intentions and burnout; at the between level, it was associated with lower burnout. Leader–follower relationship duration did not moderate these associations but showed small direct effects: longer relationships were associated with lower follower-rated authenticity and job involvement.

Research limitations/implications: Follower recruitment may have introduced selection bias, and the brief scale may have constrained measurement precision. Authentic leadership operated through multilevel pathways, predicting positive individual outcomes and explaining leader-level differences in burnout. Future research should adopt person-centered and longitudinal approaches.

Practical implications: Leadership development should integrate feedback mechanisms that align leader and follower perceptions to sustain commitment and well-being, while adapting practices to sector-specific contexts. In addition, role rotation or relational renewal practices may help prevent stagnation in long-standing leader–follower relationships.

Originality/value: By integrating perceptual variation, relationship duration, and multilevel modeling, this study advances a follower-centric, context-sensitive understanding of authentic leadership and its differentiated effects across analytical levels.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Tarja Turtio-Annanolli

PhD Candidate, Department
of Psychology, University of
Jyväskylä, Finland

tarja@tarjaturtio.fi

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1 INTRODUCTION

As organizations worldwide navigate volatility and uncertainty, authentic leadership has emerged as a relevant leadership paradigm (Zhang et al., 2021). Grounded in positive psychology and organizational behavior theory, it refers to the ability of leaders to adapt their behavior to societal demands and bring a positive, uplifting influence that aligns closely with what followers seek in interpersonal relations (Alok, 2014; Gardner et al., 2021, 2024; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Recent studies emphasize that authenticity is a relational perception constructed by followers in interaction with their leader, creating conditions that promote commitment and well-being (Avolio & Luthans, 2005; Gardner et al., 2024; Luthans & Avolio, 2003; Steffens et al., 2021b).

Within the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) framework, leadership has been conceptualized as a potential job resource that may buffer strain and foster motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Prior studies have shown that authentic leadership promotes higher work engagement and reduces burnout (Avolio & Luthans, 2005; Chan, Hannah, & Gardner, 2005; Gardner et al., 2024; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Lee et al., 2020; Rego et al., 2012; Steffens et al., 2021b). If followers experience authentic leadership fostering support, it may serve as a relational resource that promotes commitment and well-being. Whether such effects depend on follower perceptions and relational dynamics remains insufficiently examined.

Although prior research has established the relevance of authentic leadership for employee commitment and well-being, the existing research still contains several notable gaps. Most studies have adopted a leader-centric approach, despite recognition of authenticity as a relational construct (Černe et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2024; Steffens et al., 2021a). Discrepancies between leaders' and followers' perceptions are common, underscoring the need for a more relationship-based approach to authentic leadership (Gibson, Cooper, & Conger, 2009; Loeb et al., 2022). Research has often focused on either the positive or negative outcomes of authentic leadership, whereas work-life balance encompasses both engagement and strain. Examining both sides of employee experience simultaneously is particularly relevant in the European context, where rising burnout rates and labor shortages challenge sustainable work practices (Eurofound, 2023; Haltia et al., 2024). Temporal dynamics within leader-follower relationships have remained underexplored, despite early recognition of their practical relevance (Mossholder, Niebuhr, & Norris, 1990). Early-stage leader-follower interactions may carry disproportionate weight in shaping followers' perceptions, as individuals are particularly sensitive to relational cues when entering a relationship (Gardner et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2021), while the leader's influence

may attenuate over time as followers gain confidence and seek support from peer relationships (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). Empirical work on authentic leadership has often been conducted within single-industry settings (Gardner et al., 2024), limiting generalizability. Challenges such as burnout and turnover affect organizations across sectors, particularly in the European context, where demographic shifts and labor shortages strain work-life more (Eurofound, 2023).

To address these gaps, the present study advances a more integrative and relational perspective on authentic leadership. We adopt an exploratory multilevel approach to examine perceptual alignment and discrepancy between leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2024; Steffens et al., 2021a). We further investigate how follower-perceived authentic leadership relates to follower commitment and well-being, conceptualizing authentic leadership as a relational job resource (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Finally, we explore whether leader-follower relationship duration moderates these associations, introducing a temporal dimension to the relational dynamics of authentic leadership (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022; Mossholder, Niebuhr, & Norris, 1990).

2 THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 THE MULTILEVEL PERSPECTIVE OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP

Despite significant theoretical advancements, gaps persist in the authentic leadership literature regarding the dynamics that shape follower perception of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2021, 2024; Steffens et al., 2021a). Research suggests that authentic leadership should be viewed as a relational process co-constructed over time through leader-follower interaction (Bunjak, Lord, & Acton, 2024; Malloy, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Kavussanu, 2023). We adopt a positive modeling theory, which posits that authentic leadership emerges through reciprocal affirmation between leader and follower (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Leadership becomes authentic when followers perceive and validate consistency between a leader's words and behaviors (Gardner et al., 2024; Steffens et al., 2021a).

We follow the widely used definition by Walumbwa et al. (2008), which conceptualizes authentic leadership as comprising four interrelated dimensions of leadership behavior observable to followers (Černe et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2024; Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005). *Self-awareness* refers to leaders' ability to understand the behavioral impact they have on followers and their willingness to seek feedback to improve their interactions with them. *An internalized moral perspective* means that ethical principles guide leaders' actions and are evident

to followers through the leaders' consistency with speech and behavior. *Relational transparency* refers to the extent to which leaders share their thoughts and emotions with their followers; followers may experience the leader's willingness to admit mistakes. *Balanced processing* entails leaders inviting diverse opinions before making decisions, i.e., allowing dissent and integrating different views in the decision-making process.

While this framework has been widely applied, concerns have been raised regarding conceptual ambiguity and overly positive assumptions when authenticity is not examined critically (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Gardner et al. 2021). Value-behavior consistency may not reflect constructive leadership if underlying values are authoritarian or exclusionary. These critiques underscore the importance of examining authenticity through leader-follower relational interpretations. Therefore, we adopt an exploratory approach that acknowledges potential variation by comparing leaders' self-ratings with follower perceptions (Fleenor et al., 2010). Hence, our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1. There is variation across leader-follower dyads in the alignment between leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership.

2.2 AUTHENTICITY OVER TIME: THE MODERATING ROLE OF RELATIONSHIP DURATION

Recent research on authentic leadership suggests that its effects and perceptions are temporally dynamic (Bunjak, Lord, & Acton, 2024; Gardner et al., 2024). However, understanding how authentic leadership develops and changes over time remains empirically underexplored. According to the self-concept-based leadership theory, leader-follower relationship duration may influence how authenticity is perceived (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022). In early-stage relationships, followers' work-related self-concept may be less defined and more dependent on leadership cues (Howell & Shamir, 2005). Thus, followers' perceptions of authenticity may align more closely with their leaders' intentions, whereas later-stage perceptions may be based on broader organizational experiences and evolving expectations (Kipfelsberger et al., 2022).

Two competing theoretical perspectives exist. The first posits that authentic leadership may have a heightened impact in the early phases of the relationship, when followers are highly attuned to signs of psychological safety, transparency, and value alignment (Gardner et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2021). Early relational signals may be particularly influential in Nordic contexts, where expectations of ethical conduct and a low power distance are especially salient (Erjansola, 2024). The other is based on evidence suggesting that authenticity may require time to evolve. Tang et al. (2022) found that followers in short coworker relationships expressed doubts about

leadership authenticity, whereas consistent, authentic behavior over time fostered trust.

Kipfelsberger et al. (2022) demonstrated that visionary leadership had a greater influence when the leader-follower relationship lasted fewer than 6 years. Similarly, Shamir (2011) observed that the effects of leadership tended to diminish in strength over time. Meta-analytic evidence from Zhang et al. (2021) further supports these observations: cross-sectional studies have tended to report larger effects of authentic leadership, suggesting that time may temper outcomes. From a relational perspective, early interactions may carry disproportionate weight in shaping perceptions of authenticity, as followers actively construct meaning about leadership intentions (Gibson, Cooper, & Conger, 2009). Over time, these perceptions may stabilize into daily leadership behavior as alternative relational resources emerge. Therefore, our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2. Leader-follower relationship duration moderates the alignment between leader and follower perceptions of authentic leadership: the shorter the relationship, the stronger the congruence of perceptions.

2.3 AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP: THE JD-R PERSPECTIVE ON FOLLOWER COMMITMENT AND WELL-BEING

The JD-R theory provides a well-established framework for understanding how job characteristics influence employee well-being and commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Central to the JD-R theory is that job demands deplete energy and lead to strain, whereas job resources foster motivation and engagement. In recent years, leadership has been increasingly viewed as a critical job resource that can buffer against demands and stimulate resources (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023). In line with the JD-R theory, we examine the impact of authentic leadership on indicators of employee commitment (job involvement and turnover intention) and well-being (work engagement and burnout). Job involvement refers to the degree to which employees are cognitively and emotionally invested in their work (Feldt, Hyvönen, & Oja-Lipasti, 2012; Kanungo, 1982). Turnover intention indicates the subjective likelihood of leaving the organization due to dissatisfaction (Sousa-Poza & Henneberger, 2004; Singh et al., 2024). Work engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), and burnout refers to emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 2001).

We propose that authentic leadership may function as a relational job resource that contributes to processes of follower commitment and well-being within the JD-R framework. Previous research has shown that social

support and feedback, which also characterize authentic leadership, are associated with increased engagement (Rego et al., 2012), enhanced commitment (Winton, Whittington, & Meskelis, 2022), and reduced burnout and turnover intentions (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2021). Previous studies have supported our argument by showing that authentic leadership can lead to positive follower commitment (e.g., Azanza et al., 2018; Meskelis & Whittington, 2020; Winton, Whittington, & Meskelis, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021) and lower turnover intentions (Hsieh & Wang, 2015; Pattali et al., 2024; Wubetie, Taye, & Girma, 2020). Additionally, authentic leadership can protect employees from exhaustion and stress by fostering work environments that support job resources (Kim, 2018; Laschinger, Wong, & Grau, 2012; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Long, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, based on the JD-R theory, our third hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3. Follower-perceived authentic leadership is positively associated with follower commitment (high job involvement and low turnover intentions) and well-being (high work engagement and low burnout).

2.4 MODERATING EFFECT OF RELATIONSHIP DURATION ON AUTHENTICITY–OUTCOME ASSOCIATIONS

Although authentic leadership has been widely associated with positive employee commitment and well-being outcomes, the evolution of these associations is unclear. Emerging evidence suggests that relationship length can serve as a critical contextual moderator, shaping the influence of authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2024; Malloy, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Kavussanu, 2023). Followers in the early stages of a relationship often rely more heavily on leaders to construct meaning and emotional safety at work (Howell & Shamir, 2005). While longer-tenured relationships can change how leadership is experienced and evaluated. As followers gain experience, their expectations often shift, and the unique impact of authenticity may diminish unless actively renewed (Shamir, 2011).

Kipfelsberger et al. (2022) reported that the positive influence of visionary leadership on followers' sense of meaningfulness was more prominent in shorter relationships. Similarly, Shamir (2011) and Chan & Mak (2014) observed that the longer the relationship, the weaker the leadership effect. These findings suggest a potential attenuation of authentic leadership's impact over time, possibly due to changes in relational needs or the availability of alternative sources of workplace support. Authentic leaders may become less salient to employees without continued investment in relational quality (Bunjak, Lord, & Acton, 2024). Therefore, it is plausible that the beneficial effects of authentic

leadership on commitment and well-being are strongest when the leader–follower relationship is still relatively new.

Despite these theoretical insights, the moderating effect of leader–follower relationship duration has received little empirical attention in authentic leadership research. We address this gap by examining the moderating effect of relationship duration on authenticity–outcome associations. We expect these associations to be stronger when the relationship is shorter. As the relationship matures, these outcomes may be sustained but less distinct as other contextual factors come into play. Hence, our fourth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4. Leader–follower relationship duration moderates the association between follower-perceived authentic leadership and follower commitment and well-being: the shorter the duration, the stronger the association between authentic leadership and follower outcomes.

The proposed conceptual model and hypotheses of the study are shown in [Figure 1](#).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 DATA COLLECTION AND PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted in Finland. To ensure sectoral variation, an open call for participation was disseminated through a national network of HR professionals in May 2021. This approach allowed organizations to opt in voluntarily, without the researcher influencing participant selection. Eight Finnish organizations from five sectors, i.e., leisure, healthcare, industrial services, finance, and technology, participated. Selection was based on the organization's willingness to engage in the research process. Data were collected between November 2021 and September 2022. The timeline reflected the organization's scheduling needs; one large organization requested data collection in five phases to minimize operational disruptions.

Each organization's CEO and HR department collaborated with researchers to develop internal communications and a data-collection protocol. All leaders were invited to participate and nominate their entire team or at least five followers to be included in the study. In most cases, leaders included their entire team, which contributed to variation in team sizes (1–32 followers per leader, see [Figure 2](#)) and reduced the likelihood of selecting only favorable respondents. HR representatives collected the contact details of nominated followers and securely shared them with the researcher, who sent individual email invitations to participate in the study. The email briefly explained the study's purpose, ethical guidelines, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time

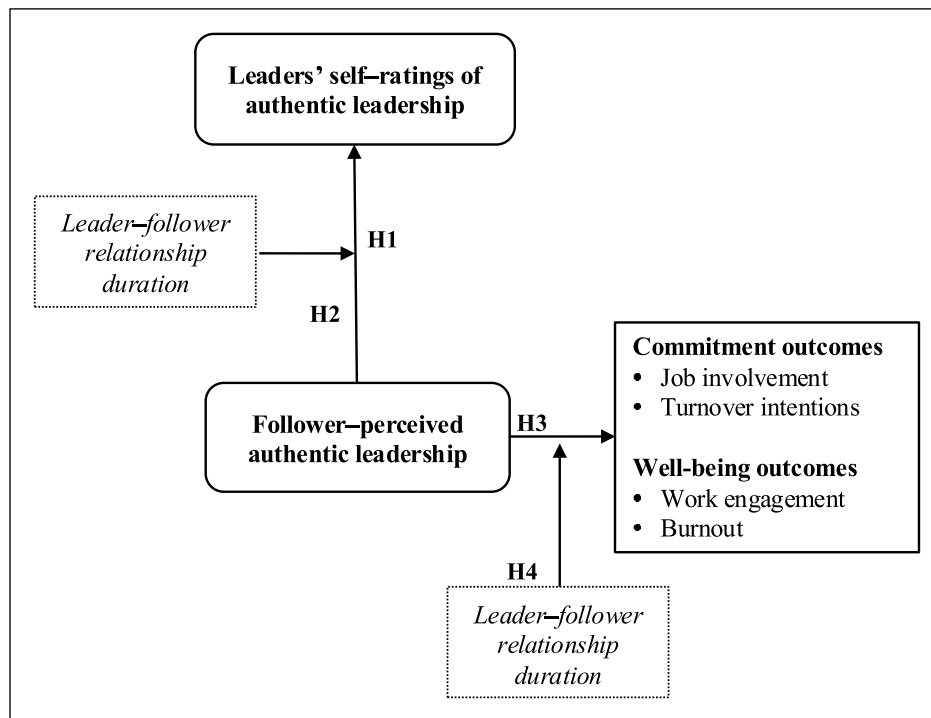


Figure 1 Proposed Conceptual Model and Hypotheses.

Technology 1 organization	Technology 2 organization	Technology 3 organization	Industrial organization	Service organization	Finance organization	Leisure organization	Healthcare organization
Response rate: 93 %	Response rate: 96 %	Response rate: 93 %	Response rate: 92 %	Response rate: 83%	Response rate: 94%	Response rate: 92 %	Response rate: 91%
Leaders n = 14; mean = 4 follower/leader	Leaders n = 13; mean = 6 follower/leader	Leaders n = 70; mean = 4 follower/leader	Leaders n = 12; mean = 5 follower/leader	Leaders n = 56; mean = 7 follower/leader	Leaders n = 50; mean = 5 follower/leader	Leaders n = 27; mean = 3 follower/leader	Leaders n = 22; mean = 6 follower/leader
Followers n = 50	Followers n = 73	Followers n = 307	Followers n = 60	Followers n = 415	Followers n = 255	Followers n = 83	Followers n = 136

Figure 2 The nesting of participants (N = 1,597) in leader-follower groups in the eight organizations.

without consequence. Participation was voluntary and confidential. Following the survey phase, feedback discussions were conducted with each participating organization and its leaders, enabling them to reflect on their leadership practices and thereby strengthening the study's relevance and ethical integrity.

The final sample comprised 1357 followers (Level 1) nested within 240 leaders (Level 2), with an average of 5.7 followers per leader (see Figure 2). Response rates were 95–100% for leaders and 76–89% for followers.

3.2 LEADER PARTICIPANTS

A total of 240 leaders who completed self-ratings and were evaluated by at least one follower were included in the analysis. Of these, 52.4% were male, with a mean age of 45.8 years (SD = 8.9). Leadership experience varied: 34.2% had 0–5 years, and 30.4% had 11–20 years. Mean leadership experience was 12 years (SD = 8.6).

3.3 FOLLOWER PARTICIPANTS

The matched follower sample ($n = 1357$) was hierarchically structured under their respective leaders. Among followers, 59.7% were female, and 48.7% were between 31 and 50 years old. The average duration of their relationship with their leaders was 1.78 years. In total, 15.3% of followers held a supervisory role.

3.4 LEADER MEASURE

Leaders rated their authentic leadership using four items adapted from the Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (ALQ) by Walumbwa et al. (2008), each representing a core dimension: (1) Self-awareness: “I seek feedback to improve interaction with others”; (2) Relational transparency: “I am willing to admit mistakes when they are made”; (3) Internalized moral perspective: “I demonstrate beliefs that are consistent with actions”; and (4) Balanced processing: “I solicit beliefs that

challenge my deeply held positions.” The selection of one item per dimension followed a pragmatic approach, applied because full-scale use was restricted, to capture the behavioral core of each dimension.

While the original ALQ uses a 5-point scale (0 = not at all, 4 = frequently), this study applied a 7-point Likert scale (1 = describes me very poorly; 7 = describes me very well), with higher values indicating stronger authenticity. The use of the 7-point scale aligns with previous studies that used adapted versions of the ALQ, such as Men and Stacks (2014), who justified this approach by noting the commercial restrictions of the full ALQ. Our adaptation aimed to maximize the variance and enhance sensitivity in the leader self-ratings. The scale’s internal consistency was acceptable ($\alpha = .67$).

3.5 FOLLOWER MEASURES

Followers evaluated their leader’s authenticity using the same four items, reworded in the third person (e.g., “My leader seeks feedback ...”), and rated them on a 7-point Likert scale. Internal consistency was excellent ($\alpha = .90$). Followers self-assessed four outcome variables.

Job involvement was measured with four items initially developed by Kanungo (1982). The scale includes items such as “Most of my interests are centered around my job” and “I am very involved personally in my job” to which followers responded on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Completely disagree”) to 6 (“Completely agree”), with higher scores indicating better job involvement. Internal consistency was adequate ($\alpha = .80$).

Turnover intention was measured with one item: “I often think about leaving my current employer,” developed by Kinnunen, Feldt, & Mäkikangas (2008). Followers responded to the item on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“Completely disagree”) to 6 (“Completely agree”), with higher scores indicating a stronger intention to quit.

Work engagement was measured using the three-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (Schaufeli et al., 2019). This shortened scale is based on the original version (UWES-9; Schaufeli et al., 2006), which has been validated in various occupational groups (see Seppälä et al., 2009). The scale reflects three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Each dimension was measured with (1) vigor (“At my work, I feel bursting with energy”), (2) dedication (“I am enthusiastic about my job”), and (3) absorption (“I am immersed in my work”), to which followers answered on a frequency-based scale ranging from 1 (“Never”) to 7 (“Daily”), with higher scores indicating more frequent experiences of work engagement. The mean score had an adequate reliability ($\alpha = .80$).

Burnout was measured using the nine-item Bergen Burnout Inventory (BBI-9) (Salmela-Aro et al., 2011), which has demonstrated good validity among Finnish leaders and organizations (Feldt et al., 2014). The BBI

captures three dimensions of burnout: (1) emotional exhaustion (3 items, e.g., “I am snowed under with work”), (2) cynicism (3 items, e.g., “I feel dispirited at work, and I think of leaving my job”), and (3) inadequacy (3 items, e.g., “My expectations for my job and my performance have reduced”). Followers responded on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 (“Totally disagree”) to 6 (“Totally agree”), with higher scores indicating greater burnout. The mean score had adequate reliability ($\alpha = .75$).

3.6 CONTROL VARIABLES

Previous research has demonstrated that leader and follower characteristics can influence leader–follower dynamics and related outcomes (Dulebohn et al., 2012). We included the following control variables to address these potential confounding effects: (a) *gender* (1 = female, 2 = male), (b) *age* (in years) for leaders and followers, (c) *leadership experience* (in years), (d) *followers’ managerial role* (1 = no, 2 = yes), and (e) *sector*, recoded into three categories: 1 = industrial services, 2 = technology, 3 = customer-oriented business, to balance group sizes and ensure comparability across contexts.

All control variables were tested for statistically significant correlations with the study’s independent and dependent variables. Those showing significant associations were retained as covariates in the final multilevel models to control for variance attributable to individual and contextual characteristics (see Table 1). This approach enhanced the internal validity of the analysis and ensured a more accurate estimation of the hypothesized relationships.

3.7 ANALYSES

All analyses were conducted using Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998/2017). CFA and invariance tests were conducted across leader and follower ratings. Factor loading invariance was supported using the interval hypothesis approach (MacCallum, Browne, & Cai, 2006), whereas intercept invariance was not, suggesting caution in comparing latent means. Due to the reduced item structure and multilevel design, sum scores were used, which may attenuate precision but are common in multilevel research (Muthén, 2002; McNeish & Wolf, 2020). Consistent with approaches for analyzing self-other agreement (Fleenor et al., 2010; Yammarino, Spangler, & Dubinsky, 1998), multilevel modeling was applied, with followers (Level 1) nested within leaders (Level 2). Hypotheses were tested using two-level regression models with continuous outcomes and random intercepts. Following Muthén & Muthén (2017), at the within-level, we examined associations between follower-perceived authentic leadership and follower outcomes, and at the between-level, the effects of leader ratings of authentic leadership, mean follower ratings, relationship duration, and their interaction. Variables evaluated by followers were analyzed for both levels, i.e.,

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<i>Follower variables</i>																	
1. Gender	1.7	.56		.03	.02	.00	-.09	-.01	.03	.04	.02					-.65	.50
2. Age (in years)	46.4	84.6	.36		.06	-.00	.01	-.01	-.01	-.01	-.04					-.07	.61
3. Relationship duration (in years)	1.8	.78	-.19	.01		.02	-.10	-.08	.01	-.05	.04					-.04	.06
4. Managerial role (yes = 1, no = 2)	1.22	.36	-.27	-.03	.32		.02	.15	.02	.01	-.05					.05	.06
5. Authentic Leadership	5.33	1.22	.02	-.28	-.25	.09		.22	-.21	.23	-.20	.01	-.10	-.03	.14	-.01	-.13
6. Job Involvement	3.84	.95	-.13	-.48	-.02	.13	.56		-.21	.43	-.20	.03	-.05	-.00	-.01	-.07	-.13
7. Turnover intentions	2.56	1.47	-.04	-.03	-.01	.16	-.44	-.43		-.30	.43	-.05	.01	.07	-.04	.003	.25
8. Work Engagement	5.57	1.04	.05	-.41	-.10	.16	.61	.92	-.54		-.41	.05	-.08	-.07	.06	-.13	-.35
9. Burnout	2.33	0.84	.09	-.06	-.06	.08	-.46	-.55	.94	-.64		-.01	.04	.07	-.14	.08	-.21
<i>Leader variables</i>																	
10. Gender	1.48	.50										.13					
11. Age (in years)	45.9	8.9										-.16	.57				
12. Leading Experience (in years)	12.0	8.6										.10	-.05	-.11			
13. Authentic Leadership	5.4	.77	.15	.32	-.23	-.19											
14. Industrial Services												-.46	.01	-.04	-.20		
15. Technology												.38	.22	0.2	0.10		

Table 1 Variable means, standard deviations, and correlations among leaders ($n = 240$) and followers ($n = 1,357$).

Note. For followers, the within-level correlations are above the diagonal, and the between-level correlations are below it. Correlation coefficients in bold font are significant at the $p < .001$ level, and coefficients in italics at the $p < .01$ level. Gender: 1 = female, 2 = male. Customer-oriented business is the reference for industrial services and technology.

each follower could evaluate their leader differently. The shared variance in follower ratings was included at the between-level. Significant covariates, i.e., leader age and leading experience, follower age, and managerial role, were included (see Table 1).

4 RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations for all study variables. At the *within-level*, follower-perceived authentic leadership was positively associated with job involvement and work engagement, and negatively with turnover intentions and burnout. A negative correlation was observed between leader-follower relationship duration and job involvement. At the *between-level*, the associations between leader self-rated authenticity and the follower outcomes were weaker. No significant correlation was found between leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership. A negative correlation emerged between leaders' self-rated authentic leadership and the leader-follower relationship duration.

To assess the proportion of variance attributable to group-level clustering, intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) were calculated using Mplus's model-constraint procedures. The ICCs were as follows: *follower-perceived authentic leadership* = .28, $p < .001$, *job involvement* = .09, $p < .001$, *turnover intentions* = .08, $p < .01$, *work engagement* = .10, $p < .001$, and *burnout* = .15, $p < .001$.

PREDICTOR VARIABLES	FOLLOWER-RATED AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP	
	ESTIMATE (β)	S.E.
<i>Within-level (level 1)</i>		
Relationship duration	-0.11*	0.05
<i>Between-level (level 2)</i>		
Leader self-rated authentic leadership	0.09	0.09
Relationship duration	-0.09	0.12
Leader self-rated AL $\times$ Relationship Duration	0.02	0.09
Leader age	-0.05	0.13
Industrial services	-0.19*	0.09
Technology	-0.20*	0.10

Table 2 Multilevel estimates of leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership and the moderating effect of relationship duration.

Note. Significant estimates in bold font: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Customer-oriented business is the reference category. The controlled variables have been selected based on significant correlations: see Table 1.

These values confirm a modest but statistically significant between-group variance across all the outcome variables, thus justifying the application of multilevel modeling.

Hypothesis 1 predicted variation between leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership. Consistent with this, no significant association was found between leader self-ratings and aggregated follower ratings

PREDICTOR VARIABLES	FOLLOWER OUTCOMES							
	JOB INVOLVEMENT		TURNOVER INTENTIONS		WORK ENGAGEMENT		BURNOUT	
	ESTIMATE	S.E.	ESTIMATE	S.E.	ESTIMATE	S.E.	ESTIMATE	S.E.
<i>Within-level (level 1)</i>								
Follower-rated Authentic Leadership	0.25***	0.05	-0.25***	0.04	0.27***	0.05	-0.19***	0.05
Relationship duration	-0.09*	0.05	0.04	0.05	-0.06	0.05	0.02	0.05
Follower-rated AL × Relationship duration	-0.03	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.04
Follower managerial role (1 = no, 2 = yes)					0.07**	0.02		
Follower age			-0.22***	0.04				
<i>Between-level (Level 2)</i>								
Follower-rated Authentic Leadership	0.09	0.19	0.01	0.17	0.10	0.17	-0.29*	0.13
Relationship duration	0.47*	0.20	-0.39	0.25	0.19	0.25	-0.14	0.16
Follower-rated AL × Relationship duration	0.26	0.14	-0.20	0.15	0.23	0.13	0.02	0.11
Follower managerial role (1 = no, 2 = yes)					0.21	0.16		
Follower age			-0.91*	0.40				
Leader age					-0.10	0.16		
Industrial services	-0.30	0.18	0.30	0.20	-0.40*	0.16	0.16	0.12
Technology	-0.58***	0.17	0.96*	0.38	-0.55***	0.14	0.22	0.13

Table 3 Multilevel modeling: authentic leadership and follower outcomes and the moderating effect of leader-follower relationship duration.

Note. Significant estimates are in bold font. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Customer-oriented business is the reference.

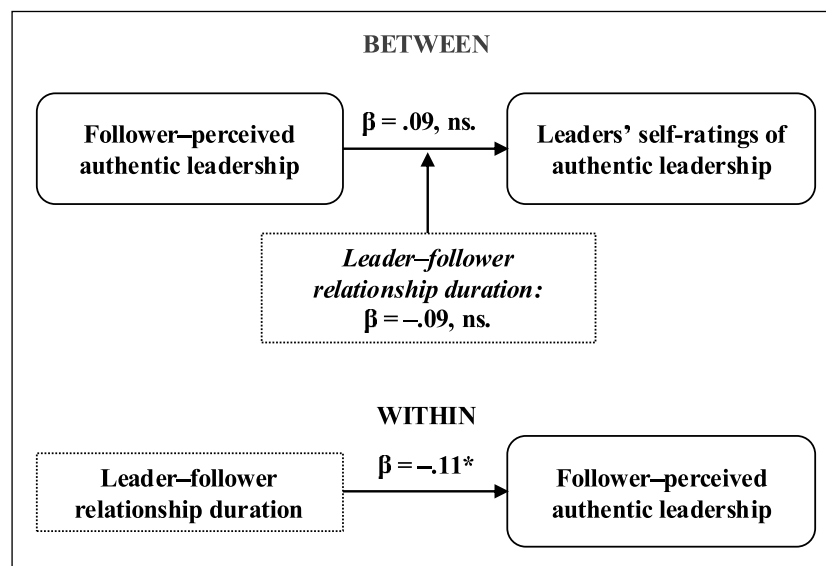


Figure 3a Multilevel estimates of leader-follower perceptual variation in authentic leadership: follower perceptions predicted by leaders' self-ratings, with leader-follower relationship duration as a moderator. Significant estimates: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

($\beta = .09$, ns; see Table 2). This indicates that authenticity is not uniformly experienced across roles, supporting Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposed that relationship duration would moderate the perceptual variation. At the *between-level*, the interaction term was insignificant ($\beta = .02$, ns), indicating that relationship length did not impact the degree of leader-follower perceptual alignment. At the *within-level*, relationship duration was significantly associated with lower follower ratings of authentic leadership ($\beta = -.11$, $p < .05$), suggesting

that followers in longer relationships evaluated their leaders as less authentic. While the moderating effect was not confirmed and the interaction was statistically insignificant, H2 was not supported. The results regarding perceptual variation and relationship duration are shown in Figure 3a.

Additional findings emerged regarding sectoral differences: followers in the industrial services ($\beta = -.19$, $p < .05$) and technology sectors ($\beta = -.20$, $p < .05$) rated their leaders as significantly less authentic than those in customer-oriented sectors.

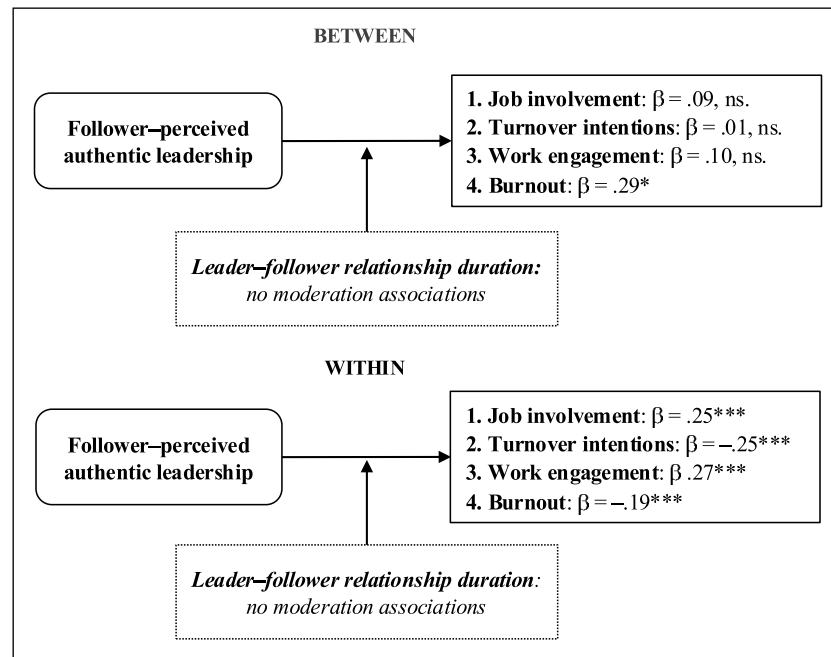


Figure 3b Multilevel estimates for follower-reported outcomes predicted by follower-perceived authentic leadership, with leader-follower relationship duration as a moderator. Significant estimates: $^*p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

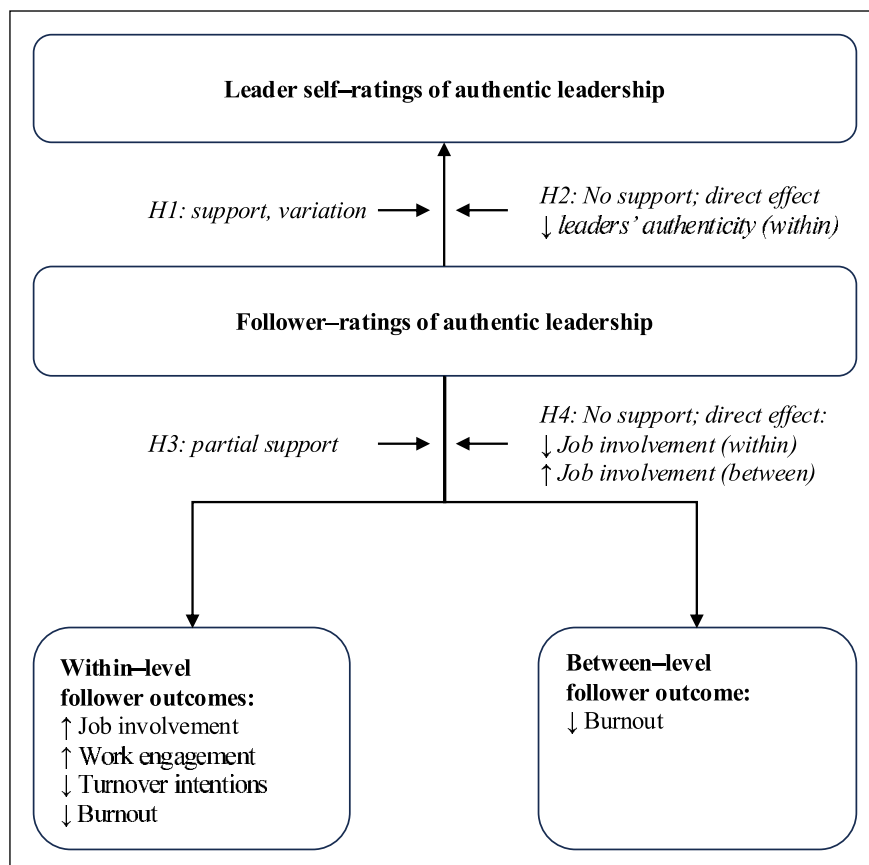


Figure 4 A summary of study findings in relation to hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3 examined the relationship between follower-perceived authentic leadership and follower commitment and well-being. As shown in [Table 3](#), all four outcomes were significantly associated with authentic leadership at the *within-level* (higher job involvement and work engagement, lower turnover intentions, and burnout). At the *between-level*, only burnout was

significantly associated with authentic leadership. These results provide partial support for *Hypothesis 3*.

Sectoral differences also appeared as *secondary findings*: followers in the technology sector reported lower job involvement ($\beta = -.58$, $p < .001$), work engagement ($\beta = -.55$, $p < .001$), and higher turnover intentions ($\beta = .96$, $p < .05$) than those in the customer-oriented sector. The

industrial service employees reported significantly lower engagement ($\beta = -.40, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 4 investigated whether leader-follower relationship duration would moderate the association between authentic leadership and follower outcomes. No significant interaction effects were found at either level, indicating that relationship duration did not alter the strength of the associations. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

The leader-follower relationship duration showed small but significant *direct effects* on job involvement: longer duration was associated with lower involvement at the within level ($\beta = -.09, p < .05$), and with higher involvement across leaders at the between level ($\beta = .47, p < .05$). The results are presented in [Figure 3b](#).

Taken together, the degree of support for each hypothesis is synthesized in [Figure 4](#), offering a concise overview of the study's main empirical conclusions.

5 DISCUSSION

This study advances authentic leadership research by using a large, multi-source dataset to examine variation between leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership and the outcomes associated with follower-perceived authentic leadership. Drawing on the positive modeling perspective and the JD-R theory, we examined our hypotheses concerning (1) variation between leader and follower perceptions, (2) the associations of authentic leadership with follower commitment and well-being, and (3) the moderating effect of leader-follower relationship duration in both associations. Together, the findings highlight the relational and context-dependent nature of authentic leadership and its relevance for employee commitment and well-being.

As expected, leader and follower ratings of authentic leadership differed, consistent with prior evidence that leader self-ratings tend to reflect internal intentions, whereas follower ratings reflect observable behavior ([Azanza et al., 2018](#); [Gardner et al., 2024](#)). Rather than viewing these discrepancies as measurement error, research on perceptual distance suggests that they reflect meaningful relational dynamics shaped by ongoing sensemaking in leader-follower interactions ([Gibson, Cooper, & Conger, 2009](#); [Loeb et al., 2022](#)).

Contrary to our expectations, relationship duration did not moderate the perceptual alignment of authentic leadership between leaders and followers. However, a small direct effect emerged: longer relationships associated with lower follower ratings of authentic leadership. From a relational perspective, one possible explanation (e.g., [Kipfelsberger et al., 2022](#)) is that early-stage relationships may amplify leader influence due to high referent power and evolving expectations. As the relationship matures, followers accumulate more

varied interactions, potentially leading to more nuanced evaluations. These results suggest that authenticity must be actively sustained.

As expected, the results indicated that authentic leadership operates differently at individual and team levels. Within-level variation among followers under the same leader indicates that leader authenticity is related to personal commitment and well-being. At the between-level, aggregated follower ratings captured the overall perceptions of leader authenticity within each team. These perceptions were associated with lower burnout. From a JD-R perspective, authentic leadership appears to function as a social resource that helps reduce the accumulation of workplace strain ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2017](#); [Kim, 2018](#); [Long, 2020](#); [Zhang et al., 2021](#); [Zheng et al., 2020](#)).

Against our expectations, relationship duration did not moderate associations between authentic leadership and follower outcomes. Instead, a modest direct effect on job involvement emerged, negative within teams but positive across leaders. This pattern may reflect a normalization process in long-standing dyads, in which the initial motivational impact of leadership diminishes (e.g., [Shamir, 2011](#)) and employees' involvement is shaped by a broader set of work-related factors. In contrast, teams with longer average tenure may develop shared norms and stability that support job involvement. Taken together, the length of relationships may shape motivational processes differently across workplace levels ([Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023](#)).

5.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study challenges leader-centric views by demonstrating that authenticity is experienced relationally ([Gardner et al., 2024](#)) and varies across levels of analysis. Although moderation effects were absent, the direct effect of the leader-follower relationship duration on follower-perceived authenticity raises important questions about how authenticity evolves. This finding is consistent with the notion that authenticity must be continually renewed to maintain its influence ([Malloy, Yukhymenko-Lescroart, & Kavussanu, 2023](#)). It may indicate a form of expectancy adaptation, whereby followers' standards increase over time, or relational fatigue, in which prolonged exposure reduces the leader's distinctiveness ([Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrgang, 2005](#)). The results invite further investigation into whether the impact of authenticity changes form over time, supporting calls to integrate temporal dynamics into authentic leadership theory ([Gardner et al., 2024](#); [Shamir, 2011](#)).

By simultaneously examining motivational (engagement, involvement) and strain-related (burnout, turnover intentions) outcomes within the JD-R framework ([Bakker & Demerouti, 2017](#); [Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023](#)), this study responds

to integrative approaches that capture both resource and strain processes in leadership research. The findings indicate distinct multilevel pathways: at the within-level, follower-perceived authentic leadership was associated with higher motivation and lower strain, whereas at the between-level, authentic leadership was associated with lower burnout. These results align with multilevel extensions of JD-R theory that conceptualize leadership as a contextual resource shaping both motivation and strain (Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2023; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007).

By drawing on data from multiple organizational sectors, this study extends authentic leadership research beyond single-industry contexts. Our results indicated variation in follower outcomes and authenticity ratings across different sectors. Employees in customer-oriented sectors reported higher levels of authentic leadership and more favorable outcomes than those in technology or industrial sectors. These findings align with context-sensitive leadership research, which suggests that leadership processes are embedded in cultural norms and relational demands (Lemoine, Hartnell, & Effinger, 2024). This evidence may reflect structural, cultural, or relational dynamics specific to sectoral work environments, e.g., the impact of customer engagement, and highlights the contextual meaning of authentic leadership. By demonstrating sectoral variation, the study supports moving authentic leadership theory toward a more contextually embedded and ecologically valid framework (Gardner et al., 2024).

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Divergence between leader and follower views underscores authentic leadership as a relational process grounded in self-awareness and the balanced processing of others' perspectives (Gardner et al., 2005; Kernis, 2003; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Structured feedback mechanisms are, therefore, a critical organizational practice that enables leaders to better understand how their behavior is interpreted. Dialogue-based sessions, developmental feedback discussions, and team reflection practices can support leader authenticity through reflective interaction (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007), while also facilitating alignment between leader intentions and follower perceptions, which is central to authentic leadership (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Such processes are most effective when embedded in psychologically safe environments, where new behaviors can be practiced, reflected upon, and gradually internalized into leadership practice (Baron & Parent, 2015).

The findings also emphasize the importance of follower-perceived authentic leadership for employee outcomes. Higher perceived authenticity supports commitment and protects against burnout. From the JD-R perspective, the findings suggest that authentic

leadership may serve as a relational resource that supports employee well-being and commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). At the same time, declining authenticity may contribute to strain.

Regular renegotiation of expectations and roles, and open communication, can help sustain authenticity over longer relationships. Regular renegotiation of expectations and roles, and open communication, can help sustain authenticity over longer relationships, as leader-follower relationships require ongoing development and mutual understanding (Gardner et al., 2005; Walumbwa et al., 2008). Furthermore, sectoral variation suggests that leadership development should be sensitive to industry-specific work structures, customer interfaces, and professional norms as they can influence how authenticity is expressed and valued. Leadership development programs should therefore incorporate contextual diagnostics rather than rely solely on universal models (Baron & Parent, 2015).

5.3 STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several strengths that contribute to the literature on authentic leadership. First, it used a robust multisource dataset comprising 1,357 followers nested within 240 leaders across eight Finnish organizations across diverse sectors. This design enabled the examination of perceptual variation between leaders and followers while supporting the modeling of within- and between-level associations. The matched dyadic structure reduced the risk of common method bias. It brought needed empirical attention to follower-based evaluations of leadership, which remain underrepresented in the authentic leadership literature despite the acknowledged theoretical importance.

However, follower recruitment partly relied on leader nominations, which may have introduced selection bias. Future research should use more independent or randomized sampling strategies. It is also worth noting that the data were collected in 2021–2022, a period marked by significant organizational adaptation following the COVID-19 pandemic. The extended data-collection timeline reflected deliberate efforts to minimize disruption, particularly in large organizations, thereby enhancing ecological validity.

The use of a shortened, four-item scale for authentic leadership limited measurement precision. The reliability of the scale among leaders was unsatisfactory, as in other studies, even when using longer versions (Zhang et al., 2021). Future research should examine the subdimensions of authentic leadership separately to better understand their distinct relational dynamics and explanatory power (e.g., Neider & Schriesheim, 2011), thereby improving both theoretical precision and measurement validity. Analytical limitations include the use of sum variables, which may have attenuated

associations, and the cross-sectional design, which prevents causal inference.

It remains possible that followers with better well-being may be more inclined to perceive their leaders as authentic. Longitudinal or mixed-method approaches would better capture the temporal dynamics of authentic leadership (e.g., Almutairi et al., 2025). Future studies should also explore the heterogeneity of authentic leadership experiences by using person-centered methods. Such approaches could help identify subgroups of employees for whom authentic leadership is particularly strongly associated with commitment or well-being outcomes. Previous research has used person-centered approaches to examine employee well-being profiles and JD-R configurations in relation to leadership (Pulido-Martos et al., 2023), but similar analyses remain relatively scarce in the authentic leadership literature.

The present findings are situated within Finnish organizational settings characterized by relatively strong cultural expectations of integrity and fairness (Eurofound, 2023). While this context provides a meaningful environment for testing theories of authentic leadership, it may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should extend research across different cultural and organizational contexts, given the sectoral differences observed in this study. A more nuanced understanding could be gained from comparative studies that match organizations by their size, structure, and purpose (Lemoine, Hartnell, & Effinger, 2024).

Future studies could focus on leaders' experiences of authentic leadership. Little is known about how leaders sustain their authenticity and how this relates to their well-being and commitment to leadership roles (Macamo & Klasmeier, 2024). Our findings further suggest that leader rotation strategies support relational renewal, as long-standing teams may become less authentic over time. Finally, sector-specific leadership development initiatives may be needed to address profession- and culture-bound expectations of authentic leadership behavior.

5.4 CONCLUSION

This study examined leader-follower perceptual alignment, the relationship between follower-perceived authentic leadership and follower commitment and well-being, and the moderating role of relationship duration. The findings showed that leaders and followers do not see authentic leadership in the same way, supporting its relational nature. Follower-perceived authentic leadership was positively associated with follower commitment and well-being, indicating its role as a social resource within the JD-R framework. Differences across sectors suggest these dynamics may also reflect contextual influences, highlighting the importance of leader-follower relationships for sustainable employee outcomes.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

- Tarja Turtio-Annanolli and Mikael Nederström were responsible for data collection.
- Tarja Turtio-Annanolli and Joona Muotka contributed to statistical analyses.
- Tarja Turtio-Annanolli, Taru Feldt, and Mari Herttalampi drafted the theoretical framework and study design.
- Tarja Turtio-Annanolli prepared the first draft of the manuscript, and all authors contributed to revisions and approved the final version.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Tarja Turtio-Annanolli  orcid.org/0009-0001-6399-6592

PhD Candidate, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Taru Feldt  orcid.org/0000-0001-7354-0487

Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Mari Herttalampi  orcid.org/0000-0001-9117-0395

PhD, Senior lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Joona Muotka  orcid.org/0000-0002-7113-903X

University teacher, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Mikael Nederström  orcid.org/0009-0002-6436-2484

PhD, Psycon Ltd, Finland

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